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## Article Information

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**Massimo Campanini, *Dante e l'Islam: L'empireo delle luci*, Roma: Studium, 2019, 174 pp.**

Gianni F. Trapletti

This year marks the seven hundredth anniversary of the death of Dante Alighieri, the greatest Italian poet. In one of his last books, the internationally known Italian scholar of Islam, Massimo Campanini, discusses the issue of the supreme poet's debt to the Arab-Islamic culture, which represented a highly debated topic among Italian scholars in the previous century.

Campanini's contribution has to be considered within the framework of what he defines the "oblivion of Islam in the West", that is the centuries-old attitude of the European culture to systematically and knowingly ignore, deny and reject any kind of link with Islam. It is clear that the well-known historical events are at the origin of the radical antagonism that caused even armed conflicts.

However, wars could not completely delete the commercial, cultural and personal relationships between the exponents of both sides, even though some people are still questioning them. In 1957, delivering a speech at Johns Hopkins University, the historian Bernard Lewis introduced the locution "clash of civilisations", which, in the 1990s, Samuel P. Huntington reintroduced and dispersed in public debates. According to this perspective, the only manner in which the Western and the Islamic civilizations relate to each-other is the strife, because they are presumed to be mutually incompatible.

Conversely, Campanini notes that Islam shares the Abrahamic religious root and numerous cultural paradigms and patterns with Judaism and Christianity, till to the point that one may claim they all belong to one single Mediterranean civilization (while Asian Islam is quite different from Arab and Persian ones).

The first chapter of the book recalls and retraces the diffusion, circulation and sharing of the texts' translations from Arabic language into Latin among the European universities at the beginning of the second millennium of the Christian era. Toledo was an important centre for translations from Arabic and Hebrew, and so it was the court of Frederick II in Palermo. In fact, the essence of the philosophical and scientific heritage of the ancient Greece was recovered for the western culture through the mediation of the Arab-Muslim thought. In the late Middle Ages the writings of Ptolemy, Euclid, Galen, Aristotle, al-Kindi, al-Fārābī, al-Ghazālī, Avicenna (Ibn Sina) and Averroes (Ibn Rushd) were made available in Latin. The result was a cultural *oecumene* that spread from Oxford, Paris, Spain, Sicily to Egypt and Baghdad.

On the contrary, the works concerning Islamic theology were given a scarce attention and only rarely translated, so that Islam as a religion was less known, and it was primarily studied with the intent to confute it. Campanini is confident that Dante, who agreed with his countrymen's negative opinions about Islam, was, at the same time, educated by the cultural milieu that relied on crucial contributions from the Arabic sources. The *Convivio*<sup>1</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> "The Banquet." Dante Alighieri, *Dante: Convivio, A Dual Language Critical Edition*, trans. Andrew Frisardi, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

*De Monarchia*<sup>2</sup>, and *La Divina Commedia*<sup>3</sup> disclose that Dante had a wide knowledge of the Islamic philosophy and sciences, even if he ignored the Quran, the Holy Book of Islam, along with Islamic theology.

In the second chapter, Campanini formulates his hypothesis about the genealogy of Dante's biographic and spiritual evolution. Although the author confesses to be a philosopher and not a philologist, he proves to be an accurate reader, a precise exegete of Dante's work. He is also well aware of the critical discussions concerning the poet. Moreover, Campanini clearly expresses his personal opinion even about issues that are still debated among the specialists. In an attempt to simplify, the author thinks (at the end of a "long meditation") that Dante's life may be divided into three main intellectual phases.

The first corresponds to Dante's adherence to the canons of the *Stilnovo* poetry and the most evident expression of that season is the prosimetrum *Vita nova*<sup>4</sup>. In this period Alighieri is closely linked to his "best friend" Guido Cavalcanti. However, the two poets' successive poetical developments diverge. Dante considers the experience of love from a more spiritual point of view, and he assumes the prophetic mission of announcing an imminent moral and political palingenesis through the intervention of the evocative Greeyhound, the ideal imperator. The later narrative of the relationship with Beatrice may be regarded as the expression of an angel-like conception of love, which does not refer to a concrete person but to an idealised image in the memory. Campanini compares

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<sup>2</sup> "On the Monarchy." *The De Monarchia of Dante Alighieri*, trans. Aurelia Henry (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1904).

<sup>3</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (Oxford: Benediction Classics, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova*, trans. Mark Musa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Beatrice's image to the “gentile signora”, the philosophy that consoles Dante (as intended by Boethius) when his young beloved dies in 1290. In the author's considerations the unfinished work *Convivio* is the result of Dante's platonising philosophical phase. Finally, after a period of existential bewilderment, the Florentine veers towards the Christian mystic and spirituality that he richly conveys in the *Divine Comedy*. There, Beatrice is transfigured and sublimated on the model of the Virgin Mary. Obviously, the three “cantiche” should not be interpreted only as a religious piece; they represent the apex of Dante's poetic art, political passion and cultural knowledge.

At this stage of his discourse, Campanini considers it necessary to temporarily interrupt Dante's analysis; and, in the third chapter, he illustrates the Arab-Islamic cultural heritage that informed the poet's time and that represents the basis of his cultural education. However, it has to be noted that often it is not possible to offer documentary evidences that demonstrate the direct descent of European cultural products from Arab antecedents.

Notwithstanding, the analogies, in content and form, unveil a symbiotic exchange between the two cultural environments. The famous *Dove's Neck Ring* (*Tawaq al-hamāma*) of Ibn Hazm from Cordova may be considered as the source of inspiration for the Provençal poetry, and probably also the precursor of some aspects of the Stilnovo. Only a century ago, Miguel Asín Palacios suggested the recurrent elements that connect the *Comedy* to *The Night Journey of the Prophet* (*Al-Isra' wal-Mi'rāj*)<sup>5</sup>. More recently, it has been hypothesised that these elements derive from the Latin and the vulgar French versions of the book by Bonaventura da Siena. In the middle of the last century, the ancient narrative was recovered

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<sup>5</sup>Miguel Asín Palacios, *La Escatología musulmana en la Divina Comedia* (Madrid: E. Maestre, 1919).

from its French version by José Muñoz Sendino and from the Latin by Enrico Cerulli. The insightful philologist Maria Corti successfully retraced the relationship between Islamic texts and the Dantesque masterpiece, with internationally acclaimed results.

The debate, in which some discordant voices still exist, is described in 2012 by Valeria Pucciarelli in *Dante e l'Islam. La controversia sulle fonti escatologiche della Divina Commedia*. Nevertheless, Campanini claims that it is notably through the influence of the philosophical thought that it is possible to detect the presence of the Arab-Islamic culture in Dante. Incidentally, the Ambrosian scholar was the editor of the Italian editions and an acute interpreter of the works of the Arab authors he quotes. Numerous pages of the book are devoted to the great commentator of Aristotle, al-Fārābī, whose influence has been diffused through Avicenna. He conceives the perfect order of the cosmos as the emanation (“fayd”) from God’s superabundance, an order that has to be mirrored in the organisation of the virtuous city ruled by the Imam-philosopher, prophet-king. In this perspective, politics has got the role to guide human beings to blissfulness by attaining the intellectual perfection.

In *The Governance of the Solitary (Tadbīr al-Mutawahhid)*<sup>6</sup>, Ibn Bājja, the Andalusian thinker known in the Latin as Avempace, teaches that through contemplation the virtuous philosopher manages to attain bliss becoming one with the celestial intelligences, even in an imperfect society. Therefore, he can attain his aim by developing his rational abilities, by accomplishing the rectification of

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<sup>6</sup> *Tadbīr al-Mutawahhid*, partial trans. Lawrence Berman, “The Governance of the Solitary”, *Medieval Political Philosophy, A Source Book*, ed. Ralph Lerner-Muhsin Mahdi, (Toronto: The Free Press of Glencoe), 1963, 122–133. *Tadbir al-mutawahhid, bilingual edition, Arabic and Italian*, trans. Massimo Campanini, *Il regime del solitario* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2002).

society and by becoming the example and the guide for the common people.

Averroes's influence on Dante has been already deeply investigated<sup>7</sup>; here, Campanini retrieves his considerations about the possibility for the human intellect to draw from the separate intelligences and God. The Italian scholar regards Averroes's thought as the extreme outcome of the Arab-Islamic speculation not only in epistemology, but also in ethics and in politics.

The last chapter of Campanini's book aims to ascertain the paradigms on which Dante relied to orient himself while developing his own *Weltanschauung*. Dante's cosmology represents a hierarchical unified system that reflects a gradual continuity from God to the human intellect, the cosmos is organised into nine concentric spheres, from the *primum mobile* to the sublunar world. The spheres are moved by the angels or separated intelligences, who love God, who is Love himself. In this earthly condition, man aspires to be united with these entities by means of the loving tension that Dante defines "intellectual" in the *Convivio* and "celestial" in *Paradise*.

This cosmological conception, which represents a synthesis between Platonism and Aristotelianism, was systematised by al-Fārābī, Avicenna and Averroes, respectively. Campanini stresses that Dante was influenced by the ideas of these philosophers in defining his own intellectual horizon, even without having read their works directly. In order to demonstrate the validity of his assumption, the author reviews a precise series of Dante's quotations and passages that may confirm the existence of an intellectual *koiné* between the poet and the Muslim philosophers.

The comparison between the Greek-Arabic cosmology

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<sup>7</sup>Alain de Libera-Jean-Baptiste Brenet et al., *Dante et l'averroïsme* (Collège de France-Belles Lettres: Paris, 2019).

and the theology of the *Comedy* (particularly of *Paradise*) makes it possible to detect Dante's specific position, wherever he introduces the typically Christian idea of the divine grace necessary to attain the beatitude. The poet is, in fact, impelled to cross the heavens to the Empyrean attracted by the love of God, not moved by the appetite of the intellect. But this aptitude, potentially fideist and irrationalist, is within the framework of the ordered cosmos described by Averroes; or, if we want to put in another way, that of Aristotle commented on by Averroes. The canticle that is supposed to prove Dante's achievement of Christian mysticism is, at the same time, filled with Greek-Arabic rationalist philosophy.

The culmination of the path is the description of the Trinity, which, in Dante is directly linked to cosmology. The poet affirms, in fact, the trinitarian unity of God by faith (*Paradise* XXIV, 130-141); and this clearly distances him from the Arab-Islamic thinkers. The description of God in the shape of lights can be compared to al-Ghazālī's philosophy of light, but the latter prevents a trinitarian elaboration; the flow of divine love, which can also be found in Greek-Arabic emanationism, does not presuppose a trinitarian subdivision.

According to Campanini, this would highlight the profound gap that separates Dante from the Arab-Islamic authors who also had an influence on him: while their proceeding is strictly rational, the man of letters is guided by a mystical afflatus, because reason would be powerless in grasping the core of the truth that conceals the mystery of God. In conclusion, the book cannot fail to emphasize Dante's ambivalent position: he seems to embrace Greek-Arabic-Islamic conceptions in his development of cosmology and politics; but he rejects them in his elaboration of the mystical theology of the *Comedy*.

This book by Massimo Campanini constitutes then a

segment, almost a case of study, of the broader research the scholar was conducting and should be read alongside with *L'Islam religione dell'Occidente*<sup>8</sup> and *I giorni di Dio*<sup>9</sup>. Last October, his sudden death interrupted his earthly investigation, but others will be able to continue the quest taking inspiration from the substantial contributions he left.

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<sup>8</sup>Massimo Campanini, *L'Islam religione dell'Occidente*(Sesto San Giovanni: Mimesis, 2016).

<sup>9</sup>Massimo Campanini, *I giorni di Dio* (Sesto San Giovanni: Mimesis, 2019).